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Books That Matter — Zen and the Art of ERM¹

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Why Zen... Again?

Glancing at the title of this article, a reader may reasonably wonder: why evoke such a well-worn — even clichéd — phrase?² Because Zen — used here, frankly, as catchy shorthand for mindfulness,³ meditation, and related contemplative practices — has much to teach anyone whose work is enmeshed in technology. Because mindfulness practices offer an antidote to the chaotic, fragmented realm that is **Electronic Resource Management (ERM)** in academic libraries. Because most librarians who work with eresources are looking for ways to feel effective, competent, and as if they are making a positive difference when torn by the constant, competing, urgent demands placed on them. Because technology has evolved faster than workplace and etiquette practices and we need new practices for the new and very real problem of information overload. Because many information professionals I speak with are looking for peace of mind, focus, clarity, and a sense of cohesion in their work that they have found elusive.

Lewis Richmond, the author of *Work as a Spiritual Practice*, puts the problem this way:

“Office and service work, which make up the majority of jobs in our postindustrial economy, don’t have the physical rhythm of crafts like carpentry. When we work at a desk, talk on the telephone, or stare at a computer screen, our pace is more mental, more jumpy and speedy. It is easy to get ahead of ourselves, to try to do too much at once. A carpenter who tried to work like that wouldn’t last long. But in the service sector it is tempting to just keep moving faster and faster, in the false hope that more will get done.”

He reminds us that if “stress is a problem for us at work, the least effective choice is to do nothing,” and he describes a possible approach to this problem:

“We may think that the pace of our work is something over which we have little control. But even in the most frenetic job, we can learn to cultivate and maintain an awareness of the body and breathing and establish small rituals of care in our movements — while walking down the hall, picking up the phone, or talking in a meeting.”⁴

This really is “mindfulness” — the quality of being present and aware no matter what the conditions. It sounds simple or even sim-

plistic to think that these mindfulness practices such as “cultivating and maintaining an awareness of the body and breath” or “rituals of care” could make a difference in personal or work life. The complexity comes not so much in the idea of mindfulness but in the practice of training one’s mind to focus in the face of the constant demands of technology based work.

(In)Attention in a HighTech World

If one were inclined to believe in a purposeful universe, one might conclude that eresources and the technology surrounding them were designed simply to test the ability of humans to focus on one thing at a time — to test their ability to concentrate at all. Problems with old resources and requests for new resources come in from the Web, phone, email, paper, and fax, in a constant stream, making it seem an impossible goal to focus on only one thing at a time. Given the volume of the operational aspects of work and the myriad problems, just watching the flow of issues arriving and trying to track them — let alone deal with them — can become a fulltime job all by itself.

If **ER** managers are going to stay afloat in this torrent of needs, as difficult as it is, it is absolutely essential to find a means of focusing on just one thing at a time — one important thing at a time. Yet this is much harder to do now than ever before. As **Jon Kabat-Zinn**, a major thinker, practitioner, and writer in the area of using mindfulness meditation to reduce stress, puts it:

“It is now harder to pay attention to any one thing and there is more to pay attention to. We are easily diverted and more easily distracted. We are continuously bombarded with information, appeals, deadlines, communications. Things come at us fast and furious, relentlessly. And almost all of it is man-made... These assaults on our nervous system continually stimulate and foster desire and agitation rather than contentment and calmness. They foster reaction rather than communion, discord rather than accord or concord, acquisitiveness rather than feeling whole and complete as we are. And above all, if we are not careful, they rob us of our time, of our moments.

We are continually being squeezed into the future as our present moments are assaulted and consumed in the fires of endless urgency.”

Who among us in the library and publishing world has not recently felt “assaulted and consumed in the fires of endless urgency?” Our world makes clear, focused thought very hard. **Kabat-Zinn** continues:

“The relentless acceleration of our way of life over the past few generations has made focusing in on anything at all something of a lost art.”

It can be a relief to realize this problem is widespread and culturally induced. Even if this depersonalizes the problem, though, as **Kabat-Zinn** describes the impact, it is troubling:

“[T]echnology itself undermines any time we might be inclined to take for reflection. ...in this way, a pervasive mediocrity can creep into our everyday discourse and interactions, especially if we are not mindful of all these insidious choices we are making from one moment to the next. ...We even interrupt ourselves, often moment by moment, in our compulsive multi-tasking, so foreign has our capacity and desire to concentrate the mind and direct it toward one object become.”⁵

Mindfulness Practices

One way to combat this problem is by taking the time to practice concentrating the mind and directing it toward one object. This, essentially, is mindfulness meditation. Most meditation courses begin with the idea of focusing on one’s own breathing — in and out, the sensation of our life force, in the moment, something that normally passes without our awareness. By training the mind to focus on breathing, one trains the mind to be able to focus, period. Many books explain meditation,⁶ and they are very helpful, but it’s not necessary to read a book in order to get started and experience the benefits of mindfulness. Try it anywhere, anytime; focus on the present moment when walking past a lovely tree — really see it; choose to spend five minutes listening to the sounds around you when you awake, rather than jumping from bed to start the activities of the day; when

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the phone won't stop ringing, take five minutes to walk the corridor while just feeling the soles of your feet hit the floor, or feeling the breath rise and fall. These practices have a pervasive effect if you stick with them. Your calm, alert ability to focus will start to carry over into your entire day, and technology will not defeat it — at least not as often.

Bringing mindfulness to bear in managing the **ERM** workload requires a lot of discipline because our environment, unlike previous environments that had the slower rhythms of the U.S. mail, printed memo distribution, and the like built into them, our world is not going to offer us the time to attend. We need to practice working against the pressures of the environment in order to slow down, to breathe, to reflect, and to be sure that we are directing our attention where it needs to be, rather than leaping from one urgent electronically-delivered fire to another.

Some examples of practices that may help are: committing to one problem and staying with it until you have a significant point reached; blocking out time when you do not answer the phone; defining periods of time, possibly even an entire day, when you will not respond (gasp) to email;⁷ scheduling specific blocks of time on your calendar to take care of things that require continuous thought; taking licenses and deep-thinking projects into quiet rooms to read. These strategies are basic, and they offer many ways of saying the same thing: we need to remember to allow ourselves time to think. These ideas may seem related to the old tips that were offered as "time management" but these practices have a different quality and purpose. Time management was about efficiency; mindfulness is about stabilizing the mind in an unstable world, and training the mind to work against the atomizing and accelerating forces around us.

Finding your own methods that create time to reflect and contemplate is part of the process. In one of my committees, we are dealing with recreating the entire user experience of accessing resources. The questions we are asking are technically and intellectually complex. At times, our heads swim during and after these meetings. We are experimenting with including a minute of silence after or before intense and complex discussions, to slow the pace and allow us to absorb information. It's too early to say whether this is working or not, but several of us have relished the chance to calm our minds and reflect before entering a stream of listening and speaking again.

Lewis Richmond (author of *Work as a Spiritual Practice*) suggests creating a special personal phrase, or self-mantra, to help

cope with the fast-paced and relentless demands at work. One individual reportedly tried repeating "Plenty of time, Plenty of care" to herself when she began to feel overwhelmed. The idea is to select a phrase that represents your own values about your work, something that will re-center you when under stress. It can be repeated silently while walking, or simply while taking a few breaths. The individual found that after using her mantra for a while, she substituted just the feeling the mantra gave her — the feeling that "I'm managing the chaos, instead of letting it get to me."⁸

Research on children with attention deficit disorder⁹ shows that being in nature improves the ability to attend; this suggests that taking mindfulness practices out into the natural world whenever possible, and simply taking time to be outside for some portion of each day, may increase the effectiveness of the practices and add to one's sense of calm presence and spacious rather than fragmented mind.

An Idea Whose Time Has Come

There is evidence that we are witnessing the emergence of a new movement that attempts to mitigate the fragmenting intensity of technology with the recognition that as human beings, biologically and neurologically we need time and space to reflect, to think holistically, to listen and to create as well as transmit and receive thousands of micromessages per day.

For example, **David Levy**, a computer scientist and professor at the **University of Washington's Information School**, told his audience in a LITA keynote speech that "we have lost sight of the need to slow down and process the information and time to contemplate the world."¹⁰ He pointed out that "life is out of balance somehow and that technology seems to have something to do with it." The balance can be restored by emphasizing reflection and contemplation in a world that does not allow us to come upon opportunities for it without conscious and consistent effort. We live in a world where an audience needs **Levy's** reminder to "take a breath, slow down, and be calm."

When mindfulness reaches library conferences, we know an idea is taking root. But there's more.

In addition to this keynote speech, **Levy** is involved in many initiatives to help support reflection and contemplation among academics overloaded with email and the speed of technology. He has recently received a \$25,000 grant from the **MacArthur Foundation** to plan something he calls the **Center for Information and the Quality of Life**.¹¹ He organized a conference called "Information, Silence, and Sanctuary." His goal, like those of other scholars studying the problem, is to "raise

awareness of the negative impact of communication technologies on people's lives and work," because these thinkers believe "the quality of research and teaching at colleges is at risk unless scholars develop strategies for better managing information, and for making time for extensive reading and contemplation."

Or as **Levy** himself puts it:

"We're losing touch with the contemplative roots of scholarship, the reflective dimension... When you think that universities are meant to be in effect the think tanks for the culture, or at least one of the major forms of thinking, that strikes me as a very serious concern."

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The focus on mindfulness is not just among academics, but is reaching into corporations as well. One organization, the **Center for Contemplative Mind in Society**,¹² has dedicated itself to helping people develop mindfulness in the workplace and works with many corporations, as well as offering academic symposia to promote contemplative practices, which they describe this way:

"Contemplative practices are methods incorporated into your daily life as a reminder to slow down, focus, and feel more connected to your self, your

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work, and your environment. Contemplative practices allow us to develop a capacity for deep concentration, usually in silence, to quiet the mind in the midst of the action and distraction that fills everyday life. This state of calm centeredness provides effective stress reduction and can also help address issues of meaning, values, and spirit. Contemplative practices can help people develop greater empathy and communication skills, improve focus and concentration, reduce stress and enhance creativity."

Together, these efforts by scholars, organizations, and many private individuals (who are turning to gardening, yoga, and other contemplative pursuits in droves) suggest a growing realization that we need new practices to cope with a new environment, and that mindfulness or related contemplative practices are the place to begin. The good news is that this is not just your problem; it's our problem — it's a problem that we must solve as individuals, yes, but also as a society. So while I like to say (somewhat facetiously) that one of the best things about eresource management is that it drove me to meditation, it is not in jest that I say I hope others will also feel inspired to take back their moments — after all, moments are all we really have — and use mindfulness practices to find peace and clarity amid the incessant stream of information enveloping us. I hope we will all join the work that has begun to transform our lives so they are as healthy and effective as possible, so we feel rejuvenated and vitalized by the challenges in our work and the vast potential of technology, rather than worn out by its demands. 

Endnotes

1. I would like to thank **Diane Grover**, Electronic Collections Coordinator at **University of Washington Libraries**, for inspiring this article through a conversation I had with her in July 2005 about how focusing on only one thing at a time, and taking aggressive control and discipline in one's use of email, improves one's ability to manage eresources.

2. Zen can be translated from the Japanese as "contemplation" or "enlightenment" but is also the Japanese name for a branch of Mahayana Buddhism that was originally practiced in China. (If you have the radical trust required of readers of a collaborative, user-created encyclopedia, see the explanation in wikipedia: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zen>.) It should be considered a philosophy, way of life, or practice, as much or more than as a religion, for Zen and other forms of Buddhism do not involve worshipping a god; Zen does not address the question at all.

The phrase "Zen and the art of..." was first used in a title of a book in 1953 in **Eugen Herrigel's Zen in the Art of Archery**, but was popularized more broadly by a book that is ironically not directly about Zen: **Robert Pirsig's Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance** (1974).

Full disclaimer: I am not a Zen Buddhist. I've been studying various Buddhist traditions for a few years, have been meditating daily for about two years, and have a strong interest in mindfulness practices, which have been personally and professionally helpful to me. I hope I have not distorted or mistaken the important ideas of Zen here in this lighthearted attempt to help others find a path through the thickets of **ERM** to a more effective and pleasant worklife.

And finally, this article is not intended to suggest that technology is "bad." It is intended to discuss how to cope with its incessant demands, which come along with its great power and potential.

3. According to **Jon Kabat-Zinn**, a prominent leader, teacher, and writer about mindfulness, mindfulness is "our capacity for awareness and for self-knowing... cultivated by paying attention... this attention is developed and refined through a practice known as mindfulness meditation." The famous Zen Buddhist monk and peace activist **Thich Nhat Hanh** defines mindfulness as "keeping one's consciousness alive to the present reality." (p. 11, *Miracle of Mindfulness* — see note number 5).

4. **Richmond, Lewis**: *Work as a Spiritual Practice*, NY: Broadway Books, 1999, pp 33-35.

5. **Kabat-Zinn, John**. *Coming to Our Senses: Healing Ourselves and the World Through Mindfulness*, NY: Hyperion Books, 2005, pp 146-148. **Kabat-Zinn** wrote the widely-read *Wherever You Go, There You Are*, and is the founding director of the **Stress Reduction Clinic** and the **Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society** at the **Univ. of Massachusetts Medical School**.

6. See for example: **Sharon Salzberg** and **Joseph Goldstein**, *Insight Meditation: A Step by Step Course on How to Meditate*, which offers CDs with guided breathing and walking meditation exercises, a workbook, and study cards, Boulder, CO: Sounds True, c2001; also **Thich Nhat Hanh's The Miracle of Mindfulness: An Introduction to the Practice of Meditation, Boston: Beacon Press, c1976.**

7. Skipping email for a while is not a crazy idea I've come up with on my own. **David Levy**, the computer scientist and professor of information at the **University of Washington** (quoted extensively here), told the *Chronicle of Higher Ed* that he "unplug[s] from the Internet one day each week to clear his head." (see note #10 for full reference.)

8. **Richmond**, pp35, 39.

9. See e.g.: **Louv, Richard**. "Nature Deficit," *Orion*. New York: Jul/Aug 2005. Vol. 24, Iss. 4; pg. 70; **McGinnis, Marianne**, "Outdoor time calms hyper kids," *Prevention*. Emmaus: Mar 2005. Vol. 57, Iss. 3; pg. 54; and **Michelle Nijhuis**, "Nature's tonic," *Audubon*. New York: Jan/Feb 2005. Vol. 107, Iss. 1; pg. 11.

10. Quotes are taken from "Shoughton's" summary of **Levy's** LITA closing keynote in the blog on: "Information and the Quality of Life: Environmentalism for the Information Age (take 1)" October 2nd, 2005 at: <http://litablog.org/>. It is relevant to note that the single comment on this blog entry (as of 10/29/05) makes the suggestion that everyone "Make a daily and a weekly space for silence and solitude," and recommends a kind of mindfulness meditative practice.

11. **Young, Jeffrey R.** "Knowing When to Log Off: Wired campuses may be causing 'information overload,'" *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 4/22/05. See: <http://chronicle.com/free/v51/i33/33a03401.htm>.

12. See <http://www.contemplativemind.org/>.

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shows that were upshots of them. "*All Things Considered*," **NPR's** flagship program, commands two chapters and over 30 pages. My generation — GenX-ers — have grown up with this daily staple; it is fascinating to read of its growing pains. Its siblings *Morning Edition* and *Weekend Edition* also get air play, as well as *Performance Today*, *Talk of the Nation*, and *Marketplace*.

Mitchell's third section, "Critics," gives equal time to "Critics on the Right" (chapter 12) and "Critics on the Left" (chapter 13). He traces critical lineage from **Nixon** to **Reagan** to **Fred Barnes** and other conservative pundits; he surveys liberal critics from

William Hoynes to the editors of *Mother Jones* to frustrated community builders.

Mitchell's book inspires a great deal of gratitude for the determined movers and shakers, employees, and advocates of **NPR** and the local agencies that make up our country's public radio network. As mentioned above, GenX-ers have grown up with many of the programs that **Mitchell** profiles, making it easy to take for granted the amount of work involved in launching these productions and maintaining momentum. It is easy for us to watch a television series' "special features" on DVD and see directors and producers yammer on about the difficulties of pitching their ideas in Hollywood and the "near misses" the series might have experienced — all with the multi-million dollar backing of a commercial television network.

However, to learn of the trials of radio programming, the same programming that has become the stick by which I (and many others) measure professional journalism, and to realize how much more was at stake with these news staples when considering the life expectancy of a commercial television series, is sobering. It also inspires hope and comfort. To learn such intimate details of public radio's troubles and critics is humanizing, like seeing paparazzi photos of a celebrity making a midnight run to the Circle K for Doritos; it makes "them" — the founders, producers, writers, and broadcasters of public radio — seem like one of "us." And isn't that one of the visions of public radio, to provide insight into diverse populations so that listeners can be unified by discovering their similarities? 